

Book Review: Enzo Traverso, Melancholy and Mobilisation

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A Review of *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* by Enzo Traverso

Abstract

Taking up Walter Benjamin's idea of 'left-wing melancholy', yet investing the concept with redemptive qualities, Enzo Traverso argues that melancholy offers the left a resource for mobilising a return to revolutionary politics. Melancholy, Traverso suggests, was always a hidden dimension of the left's consciousness, a dimension that surfaced after the political defeats at the twentieth century's end. With great insight, Traverso interprets how the traumas of 1989 produced a fundamental transformation of the left's state of consciousness, altering even such basic perceptions as the left's sense of time – as the left traded future-imaginative hope for past-nostalgic memory. This post-1989 memorial gaze, Traverso suggests, continues to define the left's sense of the present. This article interrogates Traverso's central argument regarding melancholy's possibilities as a revolutionary resource, challenges his conceptualisation of a post-1989 'present', and argues that in Traverso's analysis melancholy operates more directly as a protective stance after the eclipse of utopias than as a potent resource for revolutionary revival. Nonetheless, Traverso's attention to the left's ways of living in time illuminates the emancipatory aspects of its temporal imagination.

A year into the German depression and a little more than a year away from Hitler's accession to power and the Weimar Republic's demise, Walter Benjamin captured the mood of the German intelligentsia with his 1931 essay 'Left-Wing Melancholy'. Written with fierce class animus, it castigated bourgeois intellectuals who imitated the radical language, tenor, and imagery of the Weimar left. Benjamin accused them of creating commodities posing as political art for self-absorbed, materialistic consumers. In particular, Benjamin took aim at one of Berlin's most prominent poets, Erich Kästner, who wrote 'for people in the higher income bracket, those mournful, melancholy dummies who trample anything or anyone in their path'. Kästner's poetry, Benjamin charged, was banal noise, 'like a city café after the stock exchange closes'. Benjamin's political and aesthetic criticism launched into an ethical critique of Kästner's work: that it fed parasitically on the true 'political lyricism' of giants like Bertolt Brecht. Whereas Brecht's art unsettled its readers, provoking them to new 'consciousness and deed', Kästner's exploitation of Brechtian art produced only 'complacency and fatalism' by encouraging crass and well-fed readers to 'reconcile' themselves to their political quietism. Benjamin then concluded his essay with a vulgar analogy comparing bourgeois sentiment passing itself off as left-wing radicalism to physiological flatulence, evidence of creative, and political, constipation. And, Benjamin suggested, 'Constipation and melancholy have always gone together.' [1]

Enzo Traverso, then, would seem to have his work cut out for him in his 2016 book of critical theory, *Left-Wing Melancholia*, in which he argues, intelligently and elegantly, that melancholy can offer the left quite the contrary: a resource for the politically vanquished to mobilise anew. This Traverso

describes as 'a fruitful melancholia', capable of capturing what philosopher Judith Butler has called the 'transformative effect of loss' (p. 20). It is an intrepid argument that depends on an idiosyncratic reading of Benjamin. It depends in particular on the antinomy that, while Benjamin spat upon the melancholic poses of 'the middle stratum' in 'Left-Wing Melancholy', he nonetheless elsewhere suggested the ideologically productive power of brooding for the earnestly radical intellectual. As the political theorist Wendy Brown has pointed out, Benjamin's essays on Baudelaire approached melancholy 'as something of a creative wellspring'. [2] Traverso, then, has focused his argument on a slightly different facet of political melancholy than that which provoked Benjamin in 'Left-Wing Melancholy'. What Benjamin called left-wing melancholy was left-wing only in a cynical way; it was the temper appropriated by the fraudulent mimic who has co-opted leftist aesthetics as revolutionary chic. Traverso, rather, is interested in the condition of the committed and faithful leftist intellectual made melancholic by mounting political defeat: Brecht in mourning.

Defeat without Defeatism

Or perhaps more precisely, Bensaïd in mourning. If *Left-Wing Melancholia* begins with Walter Benjamin, it ends with Daniel Bensaïd, whom Traverso reveres as the unbowed organic intellectual who remained, politically speaking, heroically militant even after communism fell and who remained, intellectually speaking, heroically productive even in personal illness and decline. As such, though Traverso attends to the leather-jacketed Leninist's glorious 'street-fighting years' surrounding May '68, he emphasises instead the books the ever-*engagé* philosopher wrote from 1989 onward, beginning with his broadside against that year's bicentennial commemorations of the French Revolution, *Moi, la Révolution*. The works that followed were sketches jotted by a master painter in a hurry to put something of his ideas down on paper: shortly after the ideological loss of 1989, Bensaïd received his diagnosis of aids. The layering of personal and political sorrows made these late works densely melancholy.

Nineteen Eighty-Nine marks Traverso's great caesura, when communism in its twentieth-century form collapsed and the left was left to find new ground to stand on. Though Traverso suggests that the left has always had 'a hidden dimension' of melancholy - consider, he suggests, the annual ritual of secular requiem at the Communards' Wall (*le mur des Fédérés*) or the 'authentic popular emotion' of mourners at Palmiro Togliatti's 1964 funeral (p. 48) - his point of emphasis is that 'it came to the surface only at the end of the twentieth century, with the failure of communism' (p. 38). To a degree, Traverso's argument about the increase of melancholy's importance is relative, regarding what remains when much is lost. As the revolutionary tide ebbed, he seems to suggest, melancholic reefs remained, visible now but there all along, previously submerged beneath the left's surface-consciousness of utopia, revolution, heroic action, and faith.

There is a difference between faith and fidelity. Traverso recognises considerable dignity in the fidelity of the Marxist intellectuals who, amid the neoliberal onslaught at century's end, held on to that which was redemptive in the left's emancipatory causes of the past. For Traverso, Bensaïd epitomised this pained persistence. And for Traverso, it was not simply in spite of defeat that Bensaïd endured. The provocative surprise of his argument is that defeat itself provided a dialectical fuel for those willing to stomach its frustrations. Traverso calls this the 'metabolism of defeat - melancholic but not demotivating or demobilizing, exhausting but not dark' (p. 51). He suggests that he takes even this insight from Bensaïd, but that is not quite right. He refers to one of those late mournful writings of Bensaïd, *Le pari mélancolique* (1997) - 'the melancholy wager'. But there what Bensaïd bet on actually was revolution. He did so melancholically, yes, because, at the twentieth century's end, revolution looked like a long bet. He bet nonetheless because the stakes were so high, because the alternative was to fold and accept barbarism. Traverso's bet is subtly but significantly different. Traverso is betting on melancholy itself, in the hope of winning revolution.

That is, Traverso's melancholy is not only descriptive, it is prescriptive. He argues that melancholy not only defines the extant left since the collapse of the Soviet Union, it suits the left as well and promises to spark resurrection. This contrasts with Brown's depiction of melancholy made at roughly the same time that Bensaïd made his wager. In an essay that appeared in 2003, Brown gazed upon the ruins of twentieth-century socialism and concluded that left-wing melancholy ought to be resisted. 'It signifies ...', she argued, 'a certain narcissism with regard to one's past political attachments and identity that exceeds any contemporary investment in political mobilization, alliance, or transformation'. [3] More than that, Brown insisted, a dimension of melancholy that weighed particularly heavily on the left since the ascent of neoliberalism was the intellectual alienation from the creative possibilities of the radical present - what Benjamin called *Jetzt-Zeit*, 'now-time' - by clinging, as she put it, to 'formulations of another epoch'. Conceptual analysis caught in twentieth-century pasts, Brown suggested, 'not only misreads the present but also installs traditionalism in the very heart of its praxis, in the place where commitment to risk and upheaval belongs'. [4]

Against Brown, Traverso wants to tell a story with memory of defeat and melancholy on page one, culminating in a future of revolution and utopia. But his own authorial melancholy, his own elegiac mood, keeps pulling him into memorial, historical, and mythical pasts, and the story he does tell begins with revolutions past and ends in melancholies present. This, again, is not the story he wants to tell. Traverso's argument is that melancholy is a valuable resource for the left to mobilise toward revolution. The example he provides, in his introduction, is Act Up, the militant, radically democratic group organised in New York during the Reagan years to demand access to affordable aids drugs. Act Up was, Traverso concludes, 'the product of a fruitful, political melancholia'. He offers activist-intellectual Douglas Crimp's words as capturing 'the spirit of this book' when Crimp said, 'Militancy, of course, but mourning too: mourning *and* militancy.' (p. 21.)

But after its mention in the introduction, Act Up disappears from *Left-Wing Melancholia*. Douglas Crimp as well. Crimp would fit in well among Traverso's constellation of brilliant twentieth-century intellectuals who experienced loss and yet endured. Traverso quotes Crimp from a 1989 October article, 'Mourning and Militancy'. Crimp went on to say more on the relationship of mourning and militancy - and indeed cautioned against what he called the 'spectacle of mourning' in his 2002 book reflecting on aids resistance and queer politics, titled *Melancholia and Moralism*. [5] Act Up's disappearing act has a fascinating effect on *Left-Wing Melancholia*: though he holds up Crimp's formula as the essence of his own book, Traverso offers no sustained examples of melancholy-as-mobilisation. It is his central claim, but the introduction's gesture toward Act Up is the book's only historical example of effective mass mobilisation rooted in melancholy.

It is an odd evasion, though not ultimately a failing. It creates an intriguing void at the centre of the book, an absence akin, actually, to melancholy, in particular the sort of melancholy that moves Traverso: the sorrow not for things lost but for hopes snuffed out still unfulfilled. Nonetheless, Traverso's unwillingness to execute his argument appears to be something of a counter-example to his claim: he *does* seem rather stuck in melancholy, not entirely immobilised perhaps but certainly more caught up in the past than the present. Which was precisely what Brown warned against.

In Traverso's mind, 1989 marks a break even more profound than the ideological chasm created by communism's collapse. For Traverso, 1989 marks the temporal divide between past and present. As a result, the present is portrayed in the book as quite flattened out, and it is this flattened present - quite different in its ramifications from 'now-time' - that makes *Left-Wing Melancholia* an unsettling read. The aftermath of the Cold War, where Francis Fukuyama has announced 'the end of history' and 'memory studies' is sweeping the academy, and François Furet has just written *The Passing of an Illusion*, is where one still finds much of Traverso's mind. The present from which Traverso writes, in other words, is a point in time he has stretched out across years and, more to the point, it

never quite sticks to the twenty-first century. As if his subconsciousness were trying to expose his reluctance to enter this century that is no longer so new, when he comments that it 'is born as a time shaped by a general eclipse of utopias', his wording for it is 'the twentieth-first century' (p. 5). When he similarly refers to 'the early twentieth-first century', the reader even begins to wonder whether this 'twentieth-first' were an intentional play on words, but it becomes evident that it is simply a revealing, poignant, slip of the mind (p. 18). It is, then, unsettling to realise how dramatically Traverso's mind is caught in the twentieth century, but it does not at all read like the narcissism that Brown describes; indeed, the temporal traumas betrayed in *Left-Wing Melancholia* evoke in the reader a deeply felt sympathy with Traverso. Nonetheless, his present always trails behind the reader, still visible on the horizon but seen in the reflection of a rear-view mirror. Traverso proposes an urgent utopian politics of tomorrow rooted in mourning for what was lost by 1989. He spars with those who would consign the twentieth-century history of leftist causes to oblivion; yet he has portrayed a present with nothing to say about the left's causes and concerns of the twenty-first century present. This, again, was precisely what Brown warned against.

Once one gets past the explicit argument into the flow of the book, melancholy actually operates more as a personal virtue of the vanquished than as the resource for collective revival Traverso initially proposed it to be. It serves as a stance by which one can survive the harsh climate of neoliberalism without being co-opted by its forces. This does not necessarily make for an effective revolutionary strategy. In his influential intellectual history, *The Last Utopia* (2010), Samuel Moyn traces a parallel path away from the revolutionary dreams of utopia that had animated the left for much of the twentieth century toward the human-rights defences adopted late in the century. Moyn recognises in human rights an ideological programme that largely became appealing during the rise of neoliberalism *because* it was 'a minimalist, hardy utopia that could survive in a harsh climate', the neoliberal climate that had desiccated 'more maximal plans for transformation - especially revolutions'. [6]

But Moyn's deeper point is that 'the human-rights revolution', whatever its tactical utility, was a strategic trap: however it might be able to withstand the elements, it nonetheless lacks the elements needed for 'more maximal plans' (read: socialism). Moyn warns that, ultimately, the human-rights project did not have the wherewithal for mobilising positively to escape the present. Traverso *argues* that melancholy offers both stiff armour for surviving assault and an arsenal for a counterattack, but he puts forth little in the way of evidence, far from sufficient to dissuade a reader of Wendy Brown's warning that melancholy is likely to *immobilise*, likely enough that one ought to seek out other, more promising mobilisational resources. Or, in the words attributed to the fine dialectician Joe Hill, 'Don't mourn, organise!'

Mourning Revolution

In 'Melancholy Images', an original chapter apparently written for this book, Traverso reads the twentieth-century left's films 'as barometers of left consciousness' (p. 87). It is the book's most captivating chapter and also the one that captures the most of Traverso's complex argument. It is also where Traverso's narrative trajectory most directly runs counter to his premise of melancholy leading to revolution. The Marxist filmography he presents moves in the other direction and ends trapped in melancholy. It is worth addressing, then, at some length.

Traverso examines, among other films, Luchino Visconti's *The Earth Trembles* (1948), Gillo Pontecorvo's anticolonialist tragedies *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) and *Burn!* (1969), and Ken Loach's *Land and Freedom* (1995). The chapter pursues two arguments critical to the broader question of left-wing melancholy. First, Traverso offers a general conceptual claim suggesting that the problem of defeat has consistently served as a central, even defining concern of leftist cinema. Moreover, he insists, leftist filmmakers' treatment of defeat offers a key to unlocking these

filmmakers', and also the broader twentieth-century left's, temporal imagination. The other argument offers a claim of historical change suggesting that 1989 marked a schism in leftist cinema that, because it was especially pronounced, lets one see with especial clarity Traverso's general 1989 line of division. In film as elsewhere, he suggests a shift in the left's focus from themes of revolution, anticipation, and utopia to those of defeat, resignation, and nostalgia. Moreover, from the particular vantage point of leftist cinema, Traverso sees particularly vividly how this shift produced a fundamental transformation of the left's very state of consciousness, altering even such basic perceptions as the left's sense of past, present and future. Traverso writes, 'From Eisenstein to Pontecorvo, from *Battleship Potemkin* to *Burn!*, left movies described struggles and announced victories'. In contrast, films of the neoliberal 1990s described suffering and recited memories, 'assuming defeat as the starting point of their retrospective inquiry' (p. 117).

Part of why the chapter is so illuminating is that it is in art such as cinema that the hopes lying on the horizons of any historical moment can be glimpsed. This is of great importance to Traverso, whose mourning for the twentieth century concentrates on its emancipatory future-visions rather than on its accomplished facts. He notes Slavoj Žižek's *aperçu that melancholy actually emanates from lack rather than from loss: Traverso explains that he mourns for 'communism as it was dreamed and expected, not as it was realized (state socialism)'* (p. 52). [7] *The fall of communism, then, reconfigured* the left's temporal consciousness, away from Ernst Bloch's notion of dreaming of that which is 'not yet' (noch nicht) to remembering 'a no-longer-existing place, a destroyed utopia that is the object of melancholy art' (p. 119). This is luminous critical theory; it also accepts melancholy as a coda to the denouement of defeat rather than a mobilisational prelude to a new story of utopian dreaming and revolution, thus causing considerable trouble for Traverso's primary argument.

Even so, along the way, Traverso shares compelling interpretations of defeat's place in the leftist imagination. To begin, he lyrically expresses his belief that the 'most impressive filmic representation of a left defeat is probably Luchino Visconti's *La terra trema* (*The Earth Trembles*)' (p. 87). In *The Earth Trembles*, not only do historical, memorial, and mythical threads of time interweave, different moments in time converge and cross. Visconti's neorealist tragedy derives from a beautiful old dialect-laden novel, Giovanni Verga's 1881 family epic *The House by the Medlar-Tree*, about the life of fisherfolk in the Sicilian commune north of Catania, Aci Trezza. [8] Many of the actors in *The Earth Trembles* were not professionals; they were villagers who spoke (and on screen speak) dialect, 'the language of poor people', as the film explains. Traverso situates *The Earth Trembles* within the postwar neorealist impulse to show 'society and human beings as they were', but sees as well a neoclassical current cutting across it that elevates the fisherfolk into a time-transcendent mythological realm, giving their plight an allegorical grandeur absent in Verga's historicist novel. Like the novel, the film offers a decidedly local story, but it concentrates the local so sharply and refracts it through such a mythologising lens that the story takes on a miraculous, fabulous universality: Aci Trezza a Sicilian Macondo.

The film also tells a more emphatically modern tale. In the novel, debt slowly, intractably strangles the family, which reacts philosophically by relying on the folk wisdom of ancestral proverbs. In the film, the merchant class - mercilessly and overtly practising class politics - swiftly strikes the family down after young 'Ntoni attempts to bypass the local wholesalers and sell his catch directly to the market at Catania. (The fish market in Catania remains today a sight to behold, staging real-life dramas of class, labour, capital, and carcass-commodity five days per week.) Unlike the fatalistic novel, the Brechtian film projects an insistence on defying social injustice *even though*, as Visconti himself once commented, such defiance 'almost always results in catastrophe' (p. 90). Such long-odds risk-taking is Bensaïd's wager.

The tragedy perhaps could speak even more directly to Traverso's theme of melancholy: class

struggle does not fail in *The Earth Trembles*; rather, it fails even to materialise – lack disguised as loss. This, indeed, is the tragedy: 'Ntoni, like Brecht's tailor of Ulm, acquires a socialist vision of collective mobilisation – he sees vividly how to defeat the merchant class that daily feeds off the fishermen's labours – but he is alone, followed by no one. Alone, he is crushed and forced to beg for work from the merchants who have, by the film's end, become Fascists. 'Ntoni suffers defeat because he was born *ahead* of his time. Socialism appears only ephemerally at the film's end, a fugitive ghost-of-the-future haunting a cement wall in the form of graffiti, a hammer and sickle.

Visconti's promise of future glory, even in defeat, is imperative to Traverso, and the same sort of promise looms even more imposingly over Pontecorvo's films. For Traverso, Pontecorvo is outright '[t]he filmmaker of glorious defeats' (p. 92). *The Battle of Algiers* shows not the 1962 triumph of Algerian independence but rather the preliminary mid-1950s near annihilation of the National Liberation Front (fln). Liberation is only briefly, obliquely, foreshadowed in an Eisenstein montage of the masses at the film's end.

Traverso usefully allows more screen time for *Burn!*, by far the lesser known of Pontecorvo's two masterpieces of Marxist cinema. Set in Queimada, a fictional Caribbean colony of the Portuguese empire, the film not only portrays revolutionary anticolonial insurgency but embeds it within an intrigue-laden world of inter-imperial espionage and provocation. William Walker, the white protagonist of the film, is a British agent seeking to sabotage rival Portugal by sowing discontent among the colonial subjects of Queimada. Engineered by an *agent provocateur*, the revolution nonetheless becomes real, overtaking even Walker. By reaching past the near-contemporary French Algeria of *Battle of Algiers* to the nineteenth-century colonial Caribbean of *Burn!*, Traverso expands the time-and-space scope of his own interrogation, pulling in Latin American revolutionary praxis of the past and also alluding to the struggle of Vietnamese revolutionaries against US empire of the film's present (more explicitly even than *Battle of Algiers*, *Burn!* is a political allegory of Vietnam). While other parts of *Left-Wing Melancholia* can feel cramped by discussion of familiar European intellectuals, here Traverso's vision of the twentieth-century left opens up to vast geographical and social worlds.

They are worlds of imagination more than of fact. When Edward Said later asked Pontecorvo what books had influenced his rendering of Caribbean history, the question 'drew a blank from him'. [9] The film is interested in history, but in mobilising it rather than following, or even remembering, it. The name of the British *agent provocateur* in *Burn!* – William Walker – Pontecorvo took from the Slave Power filibuster war criminal from the antebellum US South who made himself president of Nicaragua. The hero of the film is José Dolores, whose name is taken from the black colonel, José Dolores Estrada, who led a Nicaraguan army to victory against Walker's forces in the 1856 Battle of San Jacinto, after the filibuster had legalised slavery. The Dolores of *Burn!* was performed with a rare charismatic intensity by Evaristo Márquez, a black Colombian man who had never acted before and spoke only a Spanish-African Creole, not the English his role called for. [10] Márquez's Dolores heroically does not run from defeat, does not fear death, and before he is executed taunts Walker that white colonial rule only owns the moment, adding, 'till when' (p. 95)? 'Till when' is the future-pregnant question that both *The Battle of Algiers* and *Burn!* mobilise history to pose.

Pontecorvo's liberty with narrow facts speaks to a methodological argument that Traverso makes later in his book, following Benjamin, critical of historicism. For Traverso, as for Benjamin, historicism 'accepts as ineluctable the victory of the rulers' (Traverso's words) leading to a certain 'empathy with the victors' (Benjamin's) (p. 222). Traverso is interested in countering both the sense of ineluctability and the perspective of victors. Pontecorvo, however, was probably only interested in contesting the latter: his films imply a certain fatalism of conflict, and a certainty of future liberation; the embittered critique is that powerful empires put off the inevitable and make the ordeal of reaching the necessary conclusion bloodier and more brutish than it need be. Such

inevitability is not Bensaïd's wager - it is actually akin to the historicism that Traverso, like Bensaïd and Benjamin, attempts to subvert.

Goodbye, Lenin!

Pontecorvo's absence after *Burn!* eats at Traverso, as it has at many of the director's admirers. However, by withdrawing after his 1960s glories, the director personified Traverso's theme of leftist retreat with melancholic dignity. Said and Tariq Ali's 1992 documentary *Pontecorvo: The Dictatorship of Truth* took the director to task for the unproductivity of his later years, even going so far as to cruelly play a couple of the commercials for Italian television that Pontecorvo directed as an older man to make ends meet. When Ken Loach met Pontecorvo, Loach has said, he 'chided him for not making more films'. [11] Pontecorvo lived into the twenty-first century without producing another major political film. During the 1980s, he had considered a tale of Óscar Romero's assassination, which he hoped would star Gene Hackman.

The *Romero* (as directed by John Duigan) that did emerge, in Traverso's terrible 1989, exemplified the transformation of leftist consciousness that Traverso charts. Coincident with the left's turn from 'not yet' to 'no longer' was a depoliticisation of politics. That is, not only did the left abandon dreams of the future for memories of the past, it also turned to remembering, even memorialising, the past in terms of suffering instead of struggle. With the 1980s-'90s ascent of memory studies, Traverso (who has written extensively on Holocaust memory) observes, 'A previously discreet and modest figure bursts on [to] the center of the stage: the *victim*' (p. 10). [12] Romero made such an appealing figure in 1989 because he was a martyr, and also because he had shied away from ideological struggle. He was a reasonable man, a moderate man, shot down even though he sought to avoid the extremes of his century. Borrowing a fine line from one of his earlier books, Traverso laments the neoliberal era's deadening of the ideological past:

The memory of the Gulag erased that of revolutions, the memory of the Holocaust replaced that of antifascism, and the memory of slavery eclipsed that of anticolonialism: the remembrance of the victims seems unable to coexist with the recollection of their hopes, of their struggles, of their conquests and their defeats (p. 10). [13]

More than Pontecorvo's absence, Traverso implies, it was the films that were made that abandoned the left's hopeful vision.

Traverso views Theo Angelopoulos's *Ulysses' Gaze* (1995) as a memorialisation of socialism-past that, typical of the 1990s, portrays revolution as reliquary. For Traverso, Angelopoulos presides over a funeral for communism that is poignant but bereft of the sublimatory militancy mobilised at Togliatti's funeral. Traverso describes the film's most famous scene, of a 'melancholic broken statue of Lenin' floating along the Danube, as a funeral procession (p. 99). Traverso sees in the ceremony 'an astonishing reverse of Eisenstein's *October*', in which it is a statue of Alexander III that is toppled (p. 79). It is the most painful of symbolic reversals: Lenin's desacralisation mirroring the Tsar's. Traverso could easily have seen here as well a visual quotation of Roberto Rossellini's *Paisan* (1946): the scene that opens the sixth episode, the partisan's corpse floating down the Po River, murdered by German fascists, observed by riparian crowds of women and children, silent like those on the banks of the Danube in *Ulysses' Gaze*. The melancholy of Angelopoulos's funeral scene demobilises - revolution 'leaving the stage of history' (p. 79). The melancholy of Rossellini's scene mobilises: it is clear that the gathered crowds will now sympathise with the resistance; indeed, a nearby partisan and an American intelligence agent promptly risk their lives to rescue the corpse for a proper burial. Young Gillo Pontecorvo, an antifascist active in the wartime Italian Resistance, was in the theatre watching *Paisan* in 1946 when he decided he wanted to make movies.

Traverso finds an exception to the neoliberal nineties' immobilisational memorialisation in Loach's *Land and Freedom*, released the same year as *Ulysses' Gaze*. Traverso finds that 'Loach's melancholic gaze is quite the reverse of resignation' (p. 106). Loach establishes the memorial mood for his Spanish Civil War tragedy with a framing story set in the present-day 1990s after the death of an old Liverpool Communist who had volunteered to fight fascism in Catalonia. The film ends with a funeral scene of its own. The antifascist's granddaughter, Kim, who upon his death has immersed herself in his old leftist memorabilia, stands over his grave, her fist raised in an antifascist salute as she clenches his red neckerchief. The act of mourning has made a militant of her, and her mourning is inextricable from her engagement with the past.

As compelling as Traverso's interpretation of leftist cinema's shift from the future-promises of 1969's revolutionaries to the past-memorialisations of 1989's martyrs - José Dolores to Óscar Romero - might be, it is still jarring that Traverso takes 1989's aftermath to represent the present. Indeed, his selection of films is indicative of how haunted Traverso's mind remains by that moment of twentieth-century communism's death. Consider the contrasting moods of Loach's films on the Spanish Civil War and the Irish Civil War. Loach released *Land and Freedom* in 1995; *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* came out in the twenty-first century, well into the Iraq War (2006). They are very different films even though they both romanticise the same style of popular revolution, endorse similar social-revolutionary impulses within civil wars, contain stunning parallel scenes of egalitarian assembly and free speech, and portray similarly tragic defeats. They differ, radically, in how they develop Traverso's key themes of melancholy and militancy and temporality and memory. Whereas *Land and Freedom* finds common ground with Traverso's mood, *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* resurrects Pontecorvo's revolutionism. Whereas *Land and Freedom* mourns militants past, *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* offers unflinching militancy now and forever. In *Land and Freedom*, Kim, in the 1990s, remembers the Spanish Civil War; in *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*, the film's present-day occupation of Iraq is the British occupation of Ireland. The two occupations become, to borrow Traverso's phrase, 'synchronic times' (pp. 204-34). The bluntness and ferocity of imperial violence as well as the left's strident anti-imperialism and raw class anger all palpably hit the screen in *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*. And the film derives its power from the reality that its impressions belong to the film's twenty-first century present. Unlike *Land and Freedom*, it is not a pedagogical film, instructing its audience to relearn revolution from the past. It is a representation - a barometric reading, as Traverso would have it - of its 'now-time', all the more effective because of its analogical surface ostensibly set in the past. In *Left-Wing Melancholia*, Traverso interprets *Land of Freedom* at length, but does not mention *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*. Traverso's feel for the present still scratches at the nostalgic midnight of the 1990s.

Paradigm of the Melancholy Man

Time plays tricks in *Left-Wing Melancholia* and this is nowhere more sublimely revelatory than the moments where it becomes apparent that Traverso remains in some ways psychically trapped in that midnight moment. Deeply learned in the European historiography of time, historicity, and temporality, Traverso movingly depicts time as a live, unpredictable, traumatising, and refractory force. [14] All the more affective, then, that he cannot quite anchor himself amid its currents. Much of what Traverso depicts as the present has slipped away and, indeed, been pushed away by a twenty-first century left he doesn't much recognise here. A sense of how decidedly Traverso's present is no longer present can be gained by considering that *Left-Wing Melancholia's* preface is dated December 2015, more than a quarter century since his signal moment of defeat. The question is no longer whether - Traverso vs. Brown - the left can mobilise melancholy, it is *how could the left mobilise melancholy over loss that, for so many of us, was before our time?*

None of which is to say that Traverso should have written a different, more programmatic book for present concerns. It is to say, rather, that he has given his readers an elusive work of art, and

readers ought to take it as their own task to decide what is to be done with such a book. The way Traverso's unmoored mind floats across the surface of time might make him an unreliable strategist-theoretician of contemporary mobilisation, but it gives the book a rare, quite moving, pathos. Part of this quality is undoubtedly because of the past-involved nature of the subject, melancholy, and part of it is undoubtedly because Traverso has, here and now, clipped together material written in several other moments written for several other argumentative purposes, from as far back as 2002. The result is a palimpsestic multiplicity of texts about a multiplicity of temporal vectors. Indeed, the material reality of Traverso's text begins to melt into the very form of his theoretical insights - in sync with those of Benjamin and Bensaïd - about non-contiguous, skipping, criss-crossing, looping temporalities. Time-related concepts - pasts, presents, and futures; 'not yet', 'now-time', and 'no-longer'; memory-time and historical time; times of politics and times of strategy; messianic time and dialectical time - all dance here in syncopated spins and swings that allow the reader to make sense of their rhythms.

There is much intellectual beauty and much insightful surprise in Traverso's uncommon book, so, again, my point is not to wish he had written firmly in the present for the present, but rather to observe that the path Traverso has taken has led him and his readers somewhere else in the realm of time, a location where the view has horizons quite different from our own in the here and now. And, to a certain extent, my point is to observe that Brown's critique of left-wing melancholy - written in the thick of the neoliberal age - does seem to apply to this book, which does seem inhibited by its melancholic attention to past political attachments from investing in any contemporary political question. Traverso's loyalties to twentieth-century European socialism, and his pain at its demise, do indeed appear to hijack his attempts to arrive in the present, let alone to drive into the future. In spite of Traverso's imaginative intellectual concoctions, melancholy still seems at the book's end to go more smoothly with immobilisation than with mobilisation. Benjamin, after all, called indecisive, haunted Hamlet 'the paradigm of the melancholy man' (p. 47).

And yet - what to make of it that even a reader unpersuaded by the book's main thesis finds in *Left-Wing Melancholia* a rare power? It is not a particularly long book, but it is labyrinthine, filled with coils, turnbacks, track-switches, and retracings. It reads like an old book, and it is alarming to recall that it was published as recently as 2016. If it doesn't feel particularly attuned to the present, it is a book built to last, and its proper review will always be the next one. It will certainly remain a contentious, defiantly antinomic, demanding, imposing, frustrating, and inspiring text after many reads, each one different from the last.

It is a pastward-looking book nostalgic for future-gazing. It is a melancholy book the argument of which melancholically gets stuck insisting that melancholy can mobilise. Left-wing melancholy is not only Traverso's subject, it is his method. He writes elegiacally, with an intensity that betrays the depth of his own left-wing melancholy, an emotional pit of suffering and pain and loss and voids. The writing at certain moments has a colt-like quality, not quite tamed, not entirely under even the author's control. This disturbs the argument of the book, but the reward of such bolts of imagination is for the reader to witness Traverso's mind happening upon unexpected and startling vistas. Moreover, here, as in all of his work, Traverso gives us a world where there are no inevitabilities. States here do not wither away; classes do not dig their own graves; and history does not march, forward or elsewhere, lockstep or otherwise. Rather he offers an enchanted yet fallen world where time leaps, dodges, and gets away to return another day, and where those who have fallen, vanquished, can return too. It seems a hopeful belief, but Traverso is uncertain.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] Benjamin 1999, pp. 425–6.

[2] Brown 2003, p. 458.

[3] Brown 2003, p. 459.

[4] Brown 2003, p. 463.

[5] Crimp 2002, p. 198.

[6] Moyn 2010, p. 121.

[7] Žižek 2000.

[8] Extensive footnotes bring to life the Sicilian dialect of Verga's *Risorgimento* era in the Einaudi edition: Verga 1995.

[9] Said 2000, p. 285.

[10] Davis 2000, p. 47.

[11] Evans 2013.

[12] See, for example, Traverso 1995; Traverso 1997.

[13] The line is taken from Traverso 2010, p. 265. For Traverso's stirring reclamation of 'the age of catastrophe', 1914–45, as antifascist history, see Traverso 2016.

[14] See, for example, Koselleck 2004.